Tyrant, Emperor and Denunciator: The Bronze Horseman in the poems of Adam Mickiewicz, Alexander Pushkin and Chaim Lenski

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> I started to talk with Lenski about Mickiewicz and then about Poland. He interrupted the conversation, saying, 'Mon cher ami, ce n'est pas ici le lieu de parler de la Pologne, choisissons un terrain neutre, chez l'Ambassadeur d'Autriche, par example.'
> (From Pushkin's diary, December 18, 1834)[1]

The famous statue of Peter the Great by E.-M. Falconet in St. Petersburg became a poetical image almost immediately after it had been erected in 1766. At first, the new monument was celebrated in odes by court poets; later it was described satirically by Adam Mickiewicz and interpreted historiosophically by Alexander Pushkin. In the early 20th century the monument takes an important place in the works of symbolists Innokenty Annenski, Valery Briusov, Andrey Bely and Alexander Blok. This variety of interpretations was to some degree summarized by a relatively obscure Hebrew poet Chaim Lenski (he has nothing in common except for the name with a Pole Adam Lenski who is mentioned in the epigraph). Lenski's poem "Delator" (1930) combines elements of almost all previous poetical interpretations of the monument (perhaps, with exception of the ode). This Hebrew poem, however, has been until now absolutely unknown to Russian readers. In my paper I intend to analyze the different elements of Lenski's poem, trace their connections with the poems of his predecessors and demonstrate how he puts them together. In order to provide the reader with necessary background, I have included in appendices some supplementary materials.

While Pushkin and Mickiewicz undoubtedly occupy the first positions in the Russian and Polish literary canons respectively, Chaim Lenski (1905-1942)[2] is a respected marginal figure in the history of the modern Hebrew literature. He is recognized as the most distinguished Hebrew poet who lived in the Soviet Union, a rather paradoxical honor. Lenski's best poems were written in the

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[1] *Dnevnik Pushkina, 1833-1835.*(Moscow-Petrograd, 1923), p. 23.
[2] See Appendix 1

time when Hebrew became a forbidden language in that country, being labelled as a "bourgeois" language, as opposed to Yiddish which gained the status of a "proletarian" Jewish language. The last book in Hebrew was published in the Soviet Union in 1926; a few years later the entire publishing industry became monopolized by the state and controlled by the Communist party. Most of the Hebrew writers had emigrated in the early twenties, and those who stayed were completely separated from their readership and colleagues abroad. Hebrew literature continued to exist (and, in fact, it existed until the 1970's if not later), but it was confined to small groups and circles of devoted authors and readers where the works were read and discussed. Leningrad in the early 1930's, with its academic and intellectual community still alive, was perhaps one of the most active centers of the Hebrew culture in the Soviet Union at that time.

According to the memoirs of people who knew Lenski during this time, he had a profound knowledge of the Russian, Polish and German poetry, including such latest poets as Rilke and Hoffmanstal. His favorite poet was Heinrich Heine. But Lenski's real love was Hebrew poetry, both modern and medieval. His entire existence was in the realm of poetry. Later in prison, Lenski was so absorbed in creating poetry that sometimes he hardly noticed what was happening around him. His knowledge and character won for him respect from other inmates, many of whom were very educated and intelligent people.

Lenski's poetry became known in Palestine, where the majority of the Hebrew readership lived, in the early 1930's. A book of his poems was published in Tel Aviv in 1939, but the major part of his poetry reached Israel only in the late 1950's. To some extent, Lenski influenced the new wave of modernism in the 1960's (represented by such poets as Nathan Zach and Yehudah Amichai), and a couple of collections of his poetry has been published since then. Although his greatest achievement lies in the area of short lyrical forms, his long narrative poems are also very interesting. Lenski had an extremely fine feeling of form and could adapt a broad variety of European metres to Hebrew verse. On the other hand, he was very sensitive to traditional Hebrew poetry and filled his works with allusions and direct quotations from the Bible, Rabbinical literature, medieval Italian and Spanish Hebrew poetry.

The poem "Delator" was written in July-August 1930 in Leningrad. In its background lies a real flood which took place in Leningrad in 1924, exactly one hundred years after the famous flood described by Pushkin and Mickiewicz. The poem opens with an epigraph in Russian which is the first line of Pushkin's "The

Bronze Horseman": "On a shore washed by desolate waves..."[3]. The "Dedication" establishes connection with Pushkin's theme and introduces the familiar image of the monument. The pedestal is a Finnish rock, while the statue itself is made of "ringing Siberian copper". The Hebrew word נחושת 'copper, bronze' suggests two important allusions which play important role in the further development of the poem: נחושתים 'irons' and נחש 'snake'. The author is addressing "my forlorn brethren in forced labor", whose memory is scattered on the icy deserts. The city has changed its name, but again the secret police are lurking in the network of its streets. The Bronze Horseman is the monument of the inhabitants' weakness. 150 years have passed since he lifted his hand, subduing all powers to his will. But now the anger is on the boil in the depths of the Neva river.

The first part begins with shots and an escape from prison. A man of undefined criminal identity, "a thief, a robber, or a political prisoner", is running in the streets of the city. The air is full with the sounds of gunshots, alarm and bells, but the runaway hears only the tread of the people who are chasing him. Suddenly he decides to meet them face to face, turns around and discovers to his astonishment that everybody is running away from him. In the panic flight all the shadows have disappeared first, and neither sun nor moon are to be seen in the cloudy sky. A red streetcar is moving like a dying horse, with passengers stuck to it like flies to an open wound. Other people, not so lucky, are running, and their clothes are being sewn to their bodies with the threads of rain. The last line, "Is it a dream or reality of interpretation?", contains an interplay in the last word פתר, which means "interpretation of dream", but is an homophone with the name פטר (Peter). It suggests another meaning, "is it a dream or reality of Peter?"

In the second part the hero is staying on the granite bank of the river, his figure is straight and his countenance is scornful. Now, when his enemies are running away, he can take a rest. He ironically asks the storm not to chase the people too swiftly, since he himself has been in their position. The city is not a forest, one should be polite and know how to behave oneself. The river should not break through the fence and disturb the respectable community of a Red officer (again the interplay between אדום "red" and "Edom", traditional Hebrew name for Roman empire and Christian world in general), a comrade worker and a citizen offi-

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[3] *The Bronze Horseman: Selected Poems of Alexander Pushkin*, tr. and intr. by D.M. Thomas (NY, 1982), p. 247.

cial. After this address to nature, the hero bursts into loud laughter.

The third part depicts the flood. The river breaks into the city like a night robber in black mask with white shining teeth of foam, right out from jail. The storm is walking on the empty squares, clad in the coat of rain and ice. The city is slowly sinking in water and raises her arms, the beams of projectors, towards the sky - "save us!". But all is in vain, the black emptiness has no echo. Water is coming up, one wave is climbing on another.

In the next part the city is broken apart. The bridges-ribs are removed, the islands dispersed, the projectors extinguished. A city-dweller has returned home, his wife and family are safe and warm. There is no electricity, but they light a candle which in this time is much more pleasant than an electric lamp. The city-dweller listens to the storm outside and thinks about the troubles of the tenants on the first floor: with bundles on their shoulders, ready to leave, they are watching water bursting into their apartment, and nobody comes to help them. Yawning, the city-dweller thinks: "Great is His mercy!".

The fifth part begins with a digression on the name of the hero. The name is to reveal neither his status - thief, robber, political criminal - nor his nationality - Russian, Hebrew, Finnish, Latvian. So he receives the name Joseph, which is a mark of our time. This name is borne by the strong and powerful (here Lenski is playing with the expression אנשי השם, "men of name", i.e. famous men; he says שן, "tooth", instead of שם, "name") men in our states, Pan Juzef (Pilsudski) and Comrade Yosif (Stalin). Both of them were in jail, now they are in power... And our Joseph is walking on the streets in complete absent-mindedness. Suddenly he stops, struck by the picture of a falling projector beam. The beam lights up the monument of Peter the Great. The Horseman seems to be moving, separating the threads of rain. Joseph recalls walking in this place one autumn day some time ago, when he was suddenly surrounded and arrested by the agents of the secret police. He remembers that in that moment the Horseman pointed at him with his bronze finger, putting him in their hands. Now Joseph is free, he cries to the "ex-emperor" and accuses him in denunciation. Today Peter has no power in his city, and even the river is throwing off his granite yoke. Joseph describes the picture of absolute liberation of nature from man's power. It seems to him that the Horseman is about to flee, and he grips the horse's tail.

In the last part the flood is over, the river, like a corpse, returns to its grave and wraps itself up in its granite shroud.

People come back in the streets and find Joseph firmly holding the tail of the bronze horse. They think: "?מה פתר" (the same word play as above, 'what's the clue?/what's Peter?') - and send Joseph into the madhouse.

"The Bronze Horseman" obviously serves as a prototype of the "Delator". Lenski is using the same meter, the iambic tetrameter which in Russian is inseparable from Pushkin and from "The Bronze Horseman". Lenski is also masterfully playing with the rhyme, stressing dialogical speech, his own neologisms and foreign words. The form and the content of the poem are manifestly cosmopolitan, and Lenski insists on the existential quality of his hero. The hero is exempt from any national and social affiliation, but has a clear political identification.

Here we have an interesting parallel with Pushkin. Yevgeni, the hero of the "Bronze Horseman", also has a sort of hidden identity. Pushkin-narrator introduces his hero by the first name only (which is unusual for him), explaining that "We'll call // Our hero by this name. It's pleasant, and // Has long been congenial to my pen"[4]. Although Yevgeni comes from an old Russian noble family, his last name has lost its significance (as has the name of Pushkin himself): "We do not need his surname, though perhaps // In times gone by it shone..."[5]. Yevgeni represents here old Russian aristocracy as opposed to the new order, established by Peter the Great.

Apart from Russia, two other nations are mentioned in the "Bronze Horseman": 'the hapless Finn' and the Swede, 'our haughty neighbor', the subject and the enemy. From the very beginning the new capital have been the realization of the imperialistic dream: "By nature we are fated // To cut a window through to Europe, // To stand with a firm foothold on the sea"[6]. This proud introductory statement becomes disproved by the realization of the dream, both on the levels of reality and of symbols. Nature turns out to be an enemy instead of a supporter, and the image of the "firm foothold" meets its reversal in the description of the Horse: "where will you plant your hoofs?". The message of the introduction: "Flaunt your beauty, Peter's // City, and stay unshakeable like Russia,... let the Finnish waves // Forget their enmity and ancient bondage, // And let them not disturb with empty spite // Peter's eternal sleep!"[7] is being destroyed in the course of the poem. The "conquered elements" get out of control and cause a nightmare for the emperor.

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[4] *The Bronze Horseman...*, p. 249.
[5] ibid.
[6] ibid., p. 247.
[7] ibid., p. 249.

There is one more "conquered element" which is not named but is present on the background of both poems. This is Poland. In his comments to "The Bronze Horseman" Pushkin refers twice to Adam Mickiewicz, Polish poet who one year earlier had described the same flood and the monument in one of the several poems which form a poetical digression in the drama "Forefather's Eve"[8]. As a member of a secret Polish society, Mickiewicz was kept in St.Petersburg in a kind of honorary exile; there he met Pushkin, and their complicated relations became later a continuous theme of their poetry.[9]

Mickiewicz creates in his poem "The Monument of Peter the Great" an aura of authenticity. He includes the words of the Russian poet in quotation marks and provides the poem with footnotes to prove the documental quality of the whole story. There is no doubt among the scholars that the "famous Russian bard" is Pushkin. Mickiewicz comments on the speech of the Russian: "The colossal equestrian statue of Peter, designed by Falconet, and the statue of Marcus Aurelius that now stands in Rome on the Capitoline Hill are here faithfully described".[10] Needless to say, the real Pushkin in his poem does not endorse the words of "Pushkin" according to Mickiewicz. As we have seen, Pushkin does not object to the imperialistic side of Peter's myth; he is opposed only to its internal tyranny.

Pushkin's attitude towards Peter and his creature is ambivalent. As a "national poet", he admires the city as a majestic achievement of the emperor's will; but he sympathizes with his hero who is suffering from the present oppression by the same power. Like Mickiewicz, Pushkin projects his own situation on to his poem. He serves his emperor, but he is not protected from meddling in his private life. Wild forces which seemed to be once submerged by the emperor destroy the dream of a family idyll. The emperor himself turns from a protector to an enemy - one can easily read Pushkin's own life into this poem.

We need now to skip almost 100 years of intense literary history of the image of Peter the Great. In 1923 Valery Briusov, one of the leading Russian symbolists, wrote his "Variations on the Theme of 'The Bronze Horseman'"[11]. In this short poem Briusov

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[8] See Appendix 3

[9] A brief description of the connections between Mickiewicz's "Digression" and Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman" is given in Appendix 2

[10] *Poems by Adam Mickiewicz*, tr. and ed. by G.P. Nayes (NY, 1944), p. 471.

[11] Valery Briusov, *Stikhotvoreniya i poemy* (Leningrad, 1961), p. 475.

creates a pot-pourri of familiar motifs. The monument, two friends before him, Russia and Poland, and Yevgeni are presented against the background of the history of tyranny in Russia. The end of the poem is surprising: the Horseman sets off on his destructive ride along the streets of the city, but Yevgeni stands in his way for ever. Thus Briusov turns the Yevgeni-victim of Pushkin's poem into Yevgeni-hero of Russian revolutionary history.

Now we come to Lenski and his interpretation of the myth. He demonstrates in many places profound knowledge of Mickiewicz's poetry. Poland is present in "Delator" as one of "our states" (part 5, line 144). Lenski establishes the dual theme of the empire as an external and internal oppression in the first two lines of his poem: the rock from Finland (Mickiewicz) and the clinging bronze from Siberia (this image reminds us of Pushkin's famous poem "In the deepness of the Siberian mines", which was translated by Lenski into Hebrew).

The digression on the name of the hero obviously follows Pushkin's poem. Lenski also chooses a meaningful name: while the name of Yevgeni means "noble-born" in Greek (eu-genes) and stresses the aristocratic roots of the hero, the name of Josef is supposed to stress the universality of his fate. As a model prisoner, Joseph may be a Russian as well as a foreigner. The name of Joseph reminds us of the biblical Joseph and this connection is supported by mentioning of two his namesakes, Juzef and Yosif. The story of these two men seems to be a successful realization of the biblical model: both were in prison and both are in power now. Following the example of Stalin and Pilsudski, our Joseph runs away from prison, but he is not able to establish a new order. His attempt to act on behalf of nature is ridiculous, since nature itself turns out to be a mere ghost, haunting at night and frightening the city, but unable to subdue it.

The biblical connection finds its development in the world play in Lenski's poem. As we have seen, Lenski uses twice the word פתר, which in the Bible defines an important ability of Joseph as a פותר חלומות, interpreter of dreams. The theme of the sleeping Peter is present in the Introduction of "The Bronze Horseman", and for Mickiewicz the statue is "fettered by the frost". Lenski brilliantly uses the interplay between Hebrew and Russian to create the biblical allusion. His Joseph becomes a parody of the biblical hero. He fails to interpret the city as a

dream of Peter[12], and instead of becoming "second to the Pharaoh" he is sent to a mental hospital.

Lenski is also parodying Briusov's new variations on the old theme. Acting in the same way as Yevgeni in Briusov's poem, Joseph is not able to change anything. He hinders the Horseman from moving, but this act has no heroic significance anymore. The old emperor has no power in his city. Even the name of the city has been changed. Pushkin uses three names for the city, Petersburg, Petrograd (Russian version: grad means "city" in Church Slavonic) and Petropolis. Much later, after the beginning of World War I, the city was actually renamed Petrograd for patriotic reason. After the October revolution its name was changed to Leningrad. Lenski addresses this change of the names twice, in lines 6-7 ("The city has changed her name, but again in the network // of her streets are lurking agents of secret police") and in part 5, where Joseph cries to the statue: "Your city is called by another's name" (line 176).

It seems that the only thing that has not changed in the city is the power of spies and denunciators. This theme was central for Mickiewicz who compared the policy of Peter the Great and Marcus Aurelius. This comparison may have been suggested by the Latin inscription on the pedestal of the monument, 'Petro primo Catharina secunda', which is mentioned in Mickiewicz's own comments to the poem. Lenski goes farther, identifying Peter himself with the denunciator, "Delator". This Latin term became part of Hebrew language after the failure of two revolts in Judea against the Roman rule in late antiquity. The Roman authorities prohibited teaching Torah among Jews and encouraged any information against possible violators of this order. Thus the positive value of the Roman empire in Mickiewicz's poem is reversed by Lenski through his preference of the rare Latin word to a common Hebrew one. However, the term "Delator" and "Delatoria" (denunciation) was used in Hebrew not only in this strict sense. One midrash says that in an attempt to convince Eva to eat the prohibited fruit, the serpent said "delatoria" on God. If we recall now that the root נחש means both serpent and bronze, we get a new connotation which introduces the religious interpretation of this symbol.

The theme of police and denunciation does not come to the surface in "The Bronze Horseman". Its presence was discovered by

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[12] The image of St. Petersburg as a dream of its founder becomes a commonplace in the poetics of Russian symbolism; two examples are *Peterburg* of Andrey Bely and poem "Peterburg" of Innokenty Annenski.

Andrey Bely, who insisted on reading of the poem against the background of Pushkin's personal history. The poem had been written in 1833, but was not published until the death of Pushkin in a duel in 1837 because of the intervention of Czar Nicholas I, who considered himself as a "personal censor" of Pushkin. Bely argues that Pushkin's wife was for several years an object of the attention of Nicholas I, which made the poet feel himself absolutely helpless about this situation. His private life was surrounded by intrigues, and many eyes intently followed the development of his tragedy. Bely connects these court spies with the image of the stone lions which appears twice in the poem[13]. Here is how Pushkin describes the last encounter between Yevgeni and the monument: "He found himself at the foot of the pillars of // The great house. Over the porch the lions stood // On guard, like living creatures, with their paws // Upraised; and eminently dark and high // Above the railed-in rock, with arm outstretched, // The Image, mounted on his horse of bronze."[14] It should be added that the word for image in the last line is the Church Slavonic term for a pagan idol. Bely argues further that the duel with an alleged insulter, a French émigré d'Anthes, was for Pushkin the only possible escape from a much more terrible outrage that was about to come from Czar's side.

As we have seen, all three poems reflect both the very personal situation of the authors and the general mood of life in the Russian Empire/Soviet Union. Personal, social-political and natural elements are closely interwoven and mirror each other. The natural elements such as stone, metal and water assume social functions and become symbols of order, oppression and rebellion. In the Introduction to the "Bronze Horseman" these elements represent harmony: "I love you, Peter's creation, I love your stern // Harmonious look, the Neva's majestic flow, // Her granite banks, the iron tracery of your railings..."[15] . The flood seems to destroy the order and the hierarchy of the relationships of the elements. But despite the catastrophe they remain connected. In the middle of disaster we see Yevgeni straddling the stone lion: "And he, as though bewitched, as if riveted // To the marble, cannot get down! Around him // Is water and nothing else! And, his back turned // To him, in unshakeable

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[13] Andrey Bely, *Ritm kak dialektika i 'Mednyj Vsadnik' (Rhythm as Dialectics and 'The Bronze Horseman')* (Moscow, 1929), p. 270.
[14] *The Bronze Horseman...*, p. 256. A couple of illustrations by Alexander Benois in Appendix 5 demonstrate the perception of Pushkin's poem in the Russian art of the 1910's.
[15] *The Bronze Horseman...*, p. 248.

eminence, over // The angry river, the turbulent Neva, stands // The Image, with outstretched arm, on his bronze horse."[16] The human being is here represented as a helpless victim surrounded by hostile elements, but at the same time unable to separate itself from the oppression.

Roman Jakobson has demonstrated a special role of the myth of the destructive statue in Pushkin's poetics[17]. The statue plays a major role in three of his narrative poems ("The Bronze Horseman", "The Stone Guest" and "The Fairy Tale of the Golden Cockerel"). Jakobson also connects the appearance of this myth with the period beginning with Pushkin's marriage proposal. Analyzing the internal structure of the poetic image of the statue, Jakobson notices that in all the above mentioned poems Pushkin cancels the "opposition of the *dead, immobile matter* from which the statue is shaped and the *mobile, animate being* which a statue represents..."[18] He writes further that "the opposition between the sign and the object ... disappears... and *the sign becomes reified*". [19]

Lenski turns this reification of the sign upside down. The destructive statue becomes its own caricature. It looses all its dignity and is quick to gain favor with the new masters. Peter the Great no longer has significance for Russian history, and he is desperately trying to find his place in a new order. He has fulfilled his historical function, established the state and the city and created the apparatus of the secret police. From the powerful pagan idol, Image in Pushkin's mythology, he becomes an ordinary informer. The old myth is not alive in the present historical circumstances.

We can try also to project Lenski's personal situation on to his poem. It is worth mentioning that the poet's real name was Shteynzon (interestingly, Yiddish/German 'Stein' has the same meaning as 'Peter' in Greek), and his choice of the pseudonym, evidently after Vladimir Lenski, a young poet who fell victim of Yevgeni Onegin's egoism, defines the role which Chaim Lenski had envisaged for himself in literature. In Joseph's desperate attempt to hold the Horseman one can see Lenski parodying himself. Nobody except for a Hebrew poet cares for the Russian ex-emperor who represents the old cultural tradition. Joseph is, of course, a victim of the statue, but a victim which is not willing to be separated from its oppressor.

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[16] ibid., p. 252
[17] "The Statue in Pushkin's Poetic Mythology", in: Roman Jacobson, *Selected Writings, v. 5* (The Hague, 1979), p. 237-280
[18] ibid. p.268
[19] ibid.